

A Lesson from a Rat

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There's quite a contrast between the scriptures this morning. One is saying, "You screwed up, so now God's wrath is going to come down on you." The other is saying, "Love the Lord your God with all you heart, all your soul, all your mind, everything you are. And love your neighbor as yourself." Quite a bit of difference.

Let's start with Amos, since chronologically he came first. Let me explain a little bit about what is going on in Amos' time. Amos is a prophet in Israel from the 8th century, BCE. This is after Israel split into the northern kingdom of Israel or Ephraim, and the southern kingdom of Judah. Amos himself comes from a place called Tekoa in Judah, the southern kingdom. His message though is to the northern kingdom of Israel. Specifically, he goes to Bethel, the capital of Israel, and is prophesying about the destruction of the northern kingdom.

The way scripture tells it is this. Amos was going about his daily life working for his living when the voice of God came to him with a message. God said, "Go to Israel and prophesy to them. Tell them they have not been looking out for the widow, the orphan, or the poor, the oppressed, or the sick." All of the people that Jesus tells us to go and serve. Give drink to the thirsty. Give clothing to the naked. Give medicine to the sick. Go and visit the prisoner. Give food to the hungry. Do all these things and you will have done them onto me.

Now Israel might not have heard those words from Jesus yet. But still, that was something that was required of them. Their law was a law of hospitality in the Old Testament.

But... they didn't follow it. And if you know anything about Judaism, law is paramount. Law is how you stay in relationship with God and how you are redeemed. The way to restoration from God is through law. Law and order. You follow the precepts God has set and you will be blessed.

That was another thing that was going on theologically in Israel. Nothing happened in the world without God's say so. If you got sick, it was because God wanted it to happen. If you had wealth, it's because God wanted you to have it. If your country was defeated in war, it was because God wanted it to happen. If your country was victorious in war, it was because God wanted it to happen... Are you noticing a pattern here? Nothing happened without God's say so.

But now Amos is coming into Bethel and is prophesying, "O Israel, your walls will be torn down, your children will be taken captive, your wives will become harlots, and Israel will be now more." If you read the book of Amos its pretty much nine chapters of, 'this is what God is going to do to you.' It's not just Israel though. While the longest share of Amos' prophetic word is for Israel, there are neighboring countries included in the devastation on the horizon.

All of this comes to a head in chapter seven with a confrontation between Amos and Amaziah, the Priest of Bethel under King Jeroboam's rule. Amaziah hears what Amos is saying

and goes to King Jeroboam to tell him Amos was prophesying against the King, saying the King would die by the sword.¹ Amaziah went so far as to say the land could not bear Amos' words.

While history shows the northern kingdom of Israel was in fact destroyed, Amaziah was not ready to accept the possibility of Amos' words actually coming to pass. Instead Amaziah was insistent that Amos not be allowed to prophesy in Israel. He basically told Amos, "No, you are not giving that message here. Leave this land. Go back to Judah and earn your bread there. Deliver your prophecies in your home land."

For Amaziah to do this is a big slap in the face. What's happening here is not just Amaziah saying, "Go away." Amaziah is trying to claim authority over Amos. He's trying to control the word of God as it's coming through Amos. Amaziah is saying he's the authority on what gets said in the name of God.

That's happening in today's world too, isn't it? There is a struggle going on in our society over what information the people get to hear. We see it in our news broadcasts and in our social media. Usually it's politically charged. There's what governmental administrations want us to know or think. There's also what journalists and mainstream news stations are reporting. They rarely ever put out the same information. In fact, they often contradict each other, so we are left to figure out for ourselves who we will trust.

Religious ideas and preachers and pastors bring the same struggle. Different leaders and speakers bring different interpretations, always trying to control which portions of scripture we hear and how we interpret the word of God. Does God want us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God? Or does God want us to take a Levitical approach to Jesus' teachings? Do we show hospitality to the stranger in our lands? Do we judge people for being who they are; different from the norms of society around them?

Getting back to Amos and Amaziah. It's one thing for Amaziah to try and control what Amos is saying. The thing is though, this is a theocracy. Israel was a society where religion and government were setup in the same house. God was the ultimate King in the land. When you tell a prophet of God, "You can't preach or prophesy here," you're telling God that God's word is no good. Can you imagine going before God and saying, "We don't want you here." While Amaziah was talking to Amos, who even admits he's pretty much a nobody, the act of trying to stop the message of God from getting out is heretical.

Yet, Amos' reply is simple. He says, "I am not a prophet. I come from Judah. I'm a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees." Basically, he's telling Amaziah he didn't want to come and deliver this message. Amos was going about his business when God gave him a message to deliver. When God gives you a message and says, "Go", you go.

So Amos, who wasn't a prophet, who was from someplace else, was there to deliver this message. This brings me to the point I wanted to tag onto today. It's not the message of, "Israel,

¹ This prophesy did not come to fruition. In 2 Kings 14:29 we are told King Jeroboam slept with his ancestors. This would indicate a death from natural causes. It's also unclear if these were Amos' words as part of his prophesying, or something Amaziah added to further enrage King Jeroboam against Amos.

you screwed up.” Rather, it’s the idea that even people who aren’t prophets can be called to deliver a message from God, to do a good work, to spread the love, the joy, and the word of God.

I’m gonna step away from scripture for a moment, because this idea reminded me of a Disney animated motion picture. How many of you have seen “Ratatouille”? If so, you might know where I’m going with this.

“Ratatouille” (2007) is the story of Remy, the rat, and Linguini, a hapless young man, thrown together by ridiculous circumstance. Remy, though he’s literally a rat, refuses to be held down to the life the human world has dictated for all rats. Remy sees himself as more than a vermin or a pest, and dreams of being able to prepare gourmet foods. Linguini is just trying to understand his place in the world, while getting by day to day, when he suddenly finds himself heir to a gourmet restaurant. Goofiness ensues and Remy gets his chance in the kitchen. He’s a natural. Everyone loves his food. The restaurant is getting rave reviews.

Then Anton Ego, the toughest and most highly respected food critic in Paris, steps onto the scene with a challenge. Linguini has to impress Ego, or face a review of the restaurant that will surely be devastating for business. More antics and drama follow, and the night is barely saved by Remy and his rodent family, with ratatouille being the challenge meal served to Ego. The meal transports Ego back to his childhood, to a time when he was comforted by his mother with this very dish. Ego lets go of all bravado and coldness and simply enjoys the meal for what it is; an artist’s offering to the world.

The night ends with Remy being revealed to Ego as the master chef, complete with a demonstration of Remy’s skill. Ego leaves with a mere thank you for the meal. The review appears in the newspaper the next day...

In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face, is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends. Last night, I experienced something new: an extraordinary meal from a singularly unexpected source. To say that both the meal and its maker have challenged my preconceptions about fine cooking is a gross understatement. They have rocked me to my core. In the past, I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau's famous motto, "Anyone can cook." But I realize, only now do I truly understand what he meant. ***Not everyone can become a great artist; but a great artist can come from anywhere.*** It is difficult to imagine more humble origins than those of the genius now cooking at Gusteau's, who is, in this critic's opinion, nothing less than the finest chef in France. I will be returning to Gusteau's soon, hungry for more.

Did you pick up on the important line in Ego’s review?

“Not everyone can become a great artist; but a great artist can come from anywhere.”

Not everyone is a prophet of God; but a word from God can come from anywhere. Not everyone can be a preacher. Not everyone can be a teacher, or a healer, or speak in tongues. But the gifts of the Spirit can come from anywhere.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of this idea. He takes this idea, not directly, and delivers it in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Jesus' day a Samaritan was someone who was from Samaria, which used to be the northern kingdom of Israel. But at this point in time, the northern kingdom has been wiped out. The ten tribes of the northern kingdom had been completely assimilated by Assyria and lost to history. Only the two tribes of Judah remained. But the people of Judah were not kind to Samaritans. They were a lesser class of human because their existence was the result of intercultural mixing. In short, Samaritans were half-breeds; impure and no longer part of the Abrahamic covenant. They are the other and the outcast.

We can look at the story of the woman at the well as an example of how Jesus felt about such divisive ideas. Here Jesus sits with a Samaritan woman, and has a conversation with her. They talk about their beliefs in God and where God resides, but also about the woman's life. He reveals that he is the Messiah and she takes this news to her town saying, “Come and meet a man who has told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?” The town's people come and meet him and the Good News makes its way through Samaria.

The fact the woman was Samaritan wasn't important to Jesus. What was important to Jesus was spreading the message. He wanted to get the word out. “The Kingdom of God is near. The Messiah is here, sitting right next to you, having a conversation with you.” Jesus is taking that idea of ‘goodness can come from anywhere’ or ‘people who do good can come from anywhere’ and tells this parable of a good Samaritan.

A man is walking down the road and robbers come upon him. He's beaten and left for dead. Then a pharisee comes by and crosses to the other side of the road to avoid the poor man. Next a Levite comes by, a man of the priestly order. The Levite also leaves the man for dead. But then a Samaritan, a man who is other, who is outcast, comes by and takes care of this victim who was beaten and left for dead.

There are a few perspectives to this story. There's what we normally get out of it; be kind, be good, love your neighbor. There's also the perspective of God can send help from anywhere. This is a perspective that looks outward and asks us to accept the help God sends no matter where it comes from. Don't stop someone from helping you simply because they're not who you expected or wanted.

A story I once heard about a man stuck on his roof in a major flood comes to mind. This man was a Christian full of faith that God would save him. A truck came by while the waters were still low enough for large vehicle to drive through. The driver said get in and I'll take you to safety. The man said, “No, I'm waiting for my God to save me.” The truck drove off and as the waters rose a boat came by. The driver of the boat told the man to hop in and he'd take the man to safety. The man again said, “No, I'm waiting for my God to save me.” The boat motored off and the

waters rose more, trapping the man on the very top of his roof. At this point a helicopter came by and dropped a ladder. A crew member told the man to climb up the ladder and they would fly him to safety. Again, the man said, “No, I’m waiting for my God to save me.” The helicopter flew off, the waters rose, and the man drowns. Once in Heaven the man asked God, “Why didn’t you save me? I was waiting for you to save me?” God replied, “I tried to save you three times. You kept saying, no.”

There’s a responsibility we have when we ask for God’s help. That’s to be open to recognizing the help God sends in whatever form God sends it. More times than not, it’s probably going to be in a way we’re not expecting.

The Third perspective for looking at this parable is more about us. It’s not so much recognizing that help can come from anywhere. It’s not so much be kind, be loving, and love your neighbor. It’s understanding we can be called by God at any time.

“But we’re not holy. We don’t have the words.” Moses used that excuse. Do you remember what God’s answer was? “Who made tongues?” You see, God is in control of his words and his message and God chooses who he wants to share them. God calls each and every one of us every day. God calls each and every one of us to a mission or to a purpose. We may not know what the purpose is all the time. That’s why we need to listen and be open. God speaks to all of us.

“But we’re not holy.”

Neither was Moses. Neither was Amos. Neither was a whole slew of people throughout history. Isaiah even told God, “Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips.” Don’t challenge God like that. Cause the next thing Isaiah knew he was having a hot ember plucked from a fire and touched to his lips to burn the uncleanness away. Then God said, “Now you’re clean. Go and deliver my message.”

As we go out into the world before God and before others, I’ve got a few questions for you. Are you an Amos, who says, “I’m not a prophet, but this is the message that God gave me to share with you”? Are you an Anton Ego, who goes in and presents the challenge, but realizes that things aren’t always what they appear; that grace and beauty can come from anywhere? Like Ego, do you both welcome and defend that? Or are you a Samaritan? Are you willing to step out of the systems of culture and society and break the rules of what is “proper” or expected in order to do good? Are you faithful? Are you trusting of God? Are you willing to disturb and disrupt in order to bring healing, and love, and do what is compassionate by the grace of God?

As we go forward, let us remember this message. God’s gifts can come from anywhere; can come from anyone. God’s message can be placed in anyone of us and delivered by anyone of us. When God calls you... When God calls us, will we say, “Yes, Lord”? Will we follow with trust in God, faith in Christ, and hope in the Holy Spirit? Let us go forward with such trust and hope and faith.

In Jesus name, Amen.